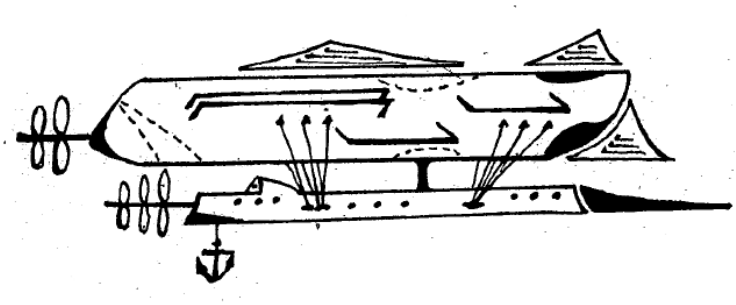
AMBIENT NEW YORK:

How Erik Satie, John Cage, and Audio Technology in the 1960s Intersected and Shaped Listening in America



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"...perhaps the great work of art has less importance in itself than in the ordeal it demands of a man and the opportunity it provides him of overcoming his phantoms and approaching a little closer to his naked reality."[1]
-Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955)

I. Listening After Satie

Two parallel histories underlie this thesis. The first is primarily musical: the course of minimal music from Paris at the end of the nineteenth century, through America in mid-century, and beyond, across the globe, in an electronic age. These days, echoes of Erik Satie — a French composer who found truth in spliced harmonic fragments, looped phrases, and appropriated noise — can be heard across musical genres, especially the unmoving sonic terrain of ambient music. "Ambient music isn't like pop music," Joshua Rothman writes in a review of Brian Eno's *Lux* (2012) in *The New Yorker*, "It doesn't want the spotlight, or to conscript your body and mind. Instead, it aims to transform and divide your attention in more subtle ways."[2] Ambient music invites subtler approaches to listening through stasis, spaciousness, or atmosphere. Whether in contemplative or passive states, listeners move through the music. Of course, minimal or non-developmental music has a past that stretches far before the Satie and the French avant-garde. Many critics cite ancient Javanese gamelan music as one starting point for ambient sensibilities.[3] The twelfth-century polyphonic chants of Pérotin have an ambient, minimalistic quality, too. The medieval master of the *ars antiqua* scored works that glacially phase and evolve not unlike Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* (1978).

[1] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 115.
[2] Joshua Rothman, "The Discreet Charm of Ambient Music," *The New Yorker,* November 15, 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/11/the-discreet-charm-of-ambient-music.html.
[3] David Toop, *Ocean of Sound* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1995).

Cover illustration: Erik Satie, "Dirigeable en cuivre 'Le rapide,'" illustration, unsigned, 6.2 x 9.8 cm. Erik Satie Papers, 1866-1925, bMS Mus 193 (101), Houghton Library at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

But a second development provides cultural conditions unique to music in the twentieth century: the history of recording technology and a corollary turn in listening from being personal and directive to being largely non-personal, immersive, and electronically mediated. In America, this pattern can be observed in a splintering of listening spaces — from concert halls to amorphous substitutes such as home stereo systems, car radios, headphones, laptop speakers, intercom systems, and so on. Rarely, now, do people actually sit down and listen to music. Instead, music is saturating virtual and physical worlds — infused with infrastructures, various media, and digital tools. Owing much to the invention of Thomas Edison's phonograph, recording and transmission have redefined musical spaces and musical objects as fluid and portable; music becomes non-discrete in the mind of the listener, its meaning weighted toward the outward (how, where, and if it is heard) over the inward (what it tells, evokes, or symbolizes). The computer firm Apple provoked a minor uproar when its mobile operating system failed to run music-streaming software alongside other applications. The iPhone 4, released in 2010, could finally "multitask," so that users could jam out while browsing email or reading the *New York Times*.[4] Our MP3 culture, which swims in music as much as it listens, demanded the right to background music.[5]

These histories of ambient music and portable, fluid technologies are tethered together by changing attitudes toward sound and the sonic environment. Ever since Gustav Mahler set quiet trumpets off stage to reach ears eerily without a visual cue, artists have shaped expectations about music and space. In tandem, many advancements in technology have echoed sensibilities in ambient music.

[4] Steve Jobs, "Apple WWDC 2010," keynote address for software developers, June 7, 2010. http://www.apple.com/apple-events/wwdc-2010/

[5] An authoritative history of the MP3 has been written by Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012). Alongside its thorough account of how the digital music format was engineered, the book reevaluates digital infrastructures in the twentieth century and shows us how compression and portability have functioned centrally in audio technologies.

Magnetic tape provided means to pick up quieter and more atmospheric qualities of instruments, for example. Even a harp played *pianissimo* is given sonic real estate on records and radio, as Douglas Kahn describes in *Noise Water Meat* (1999).[6] Twentieth-century tools have allowed musicians to embrace new roles, too: the technician, the architect, the organizer of sounds and effects. "Any sound can be you," writes Chuck D. Miller in *Sound Unbound* (2008). "The Goethe and Schelling adage that 'architecture is nothing but frozen music,' becomes reverse engineered, remixed into a different scenario — and we thaw the process. Music becomes liquid architecture."[7]

British electronic musician Richard James is a sort of liquid architect. He used pre-recorded field sounds, electronic drums, and contact mics inside a piano for a glitchy, melancholic album *Drukqs* (2001), released under the alias Aphex Twin. In form and atmosphere, the record embodied avant-garde ideals of artistic disinterestedness; by featuring a computer-programmed "prepared" Disklavier — a twist on the instrument invented by experimental composer John Cage — James took the anti-romantic model of Satie's piano pieces and Cage's experimental music to a logical, digital conclusion. The result is utter headphone music. Brian Eno's foreword to Mark Prendergast's history of ambient music, *The Ambient Century* (2000), articulates how this type of music and technology can move together to create an expanded sense of space:

> One of the many trajectories along which music develops is its social dimension … what role [new forms of music] are intended to play in a listener's life, or … what the listener will put them to. … One very strong movement in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries was towards music as an immersive, environmental experience. … It's a drift away from narrative and toward landscape, from performed event to sonic space. … But it was recording which really liberated music from the moment of performance and from the performers themselves. … The act of making music becomes the art of

[6] Douglas Kahn, "The Sound of Music," *Noise Water Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

[7] Paul D. Miller, "In Through the Out Door: Sampling and the Creative Act," *Sound Unbound* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 7.

creating new sonic locations...[8]

Recording, for technological utopians like Eno, liberated music. James' record illustrated this by augmenting, programming, and amplifying sounds in impossible ways. But the fluidity of sound, its potential to be repeated, also freed its setting; whether for airports, films, headphones, records, or iPods, music is nearly always environmental: a soundtrack to the world. Toop writes of how listeners reached "a very positive rootlessness" under these unique conditions: "An ethereal culture developed … in response to the intangibility of twentieth century communications. Sound was used to find meaning in changing circumstances, rather than imposed as a familiar model on a barely recognisable world."[9] Prendergast goes further, observing that "the bleeding heart of electronic progress" has "rendered all recorded music, by definition, Ambient."[10] Likewise, Alex Ross writes how music has in some ways returned to its "natural evanescent state" by way of technology.[11]

To the same effect, I will think of minimal music as particularly tuned to the technological landscape with its alternative spaces and listener expectations. This thesis will explore the listener's "positive rootlessness," sound unconfined to a specific moment or place, artists that are disinterested if not faded to invisibility, and music that acts as a manipulative object or an architectural space through which listeners can actively wander. How do more evanescent modes of listening relate to a more evanescent type of music, and how might the wash of mid-century mass-media technologies relate? What brought listeners into an "Ambient" age? Unlike Prendergast's genealogical history, which traces a diaspora of artists and influences across the century, and unlike Toop's similarly wide-ranging and

[8] Mark Prendergast, *The Ambient Century: From Mahler to Trance* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000), xi-xii.
[9] Toop, *Ocean*, i.
[10] Prendergast, *Century*, 4.
[11] Ross, *Listen to This*, 65.

non-sequential history of music and media, I will focus on specific events in New York involving John Cage, whose works in the 1960s marked a key turn toward an ambient mode of listening.

Specifically, this thesis will examine performances of *Vexations* in 1963 and *Variations VII* in 1966 as windows into a cultural environment where a flourishing of artists, ideas, and technologies helped formulate listening as a mysterious, more immersive, technologically mediated event. Cage's two works, which respectively (but not exclusively) resurrected ideas from Satie and examined the relationship between music and technology, were key in redefining the interplay between sound, space, and listener. The American experimentalist and his relationship with technology feature prominently in other histories of twentieth-century music and listening, most notably Kahn's *Noise, Water, Meat* (1999).[12] Kahn looks particularly at intermedia arts in 1950s New York that involve liquid, and relates artists' preoccupation with fluidity to the "dissolution of the bounds between art and life." Kahn hints that the aqueous arts, culminating with Cage-inspired Fluxus artists like Yoko Ono and George Brecht, correlated with "increased flows of information and … the profusive exchanges of commodity culture."[13]

Like Kahn, I have situated Cage at the center of twentieth-century sound arts and understood him as someone who broke down barriers around art in a historically meaningful way. But in writing a history of reception, I will focus less on the intrinsic meaning of ideas, artists, and the audible, but on wider cultural context and value — sound's relation to people. This thesis gives plenty of weight to Satie, too, whose musical revival and historical interpretation in mid-century is crucial to the new

[12] In time for the centennial of Cage's birth, it seems history has caught up with Cage's all-encompassing embrace of audio. Since Joseph Attali's *Noise* (1985), there have been an explosion of historical and theoretical works under the umbrella of "sound studies" which have indirectly informed this thesis, including: Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933.* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002); Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*. (Durham: Duke UP, 2003); Douglas Kahn, *Wireless Imagination* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

[13] Kahn, *Noise,* 276.

sound-listener relationship. Prendergast deals with similar topics by way of a brief profile of Cage ("the guru of twentieth-century Ambient composition"[14]), Satie, and a disparate section about electronic media, but his artist-centered history forgoes describing New York as a particularly influential cultural region. In a biography of Cage, *Where the Heart Beats* (2012), Kay Larson navigates New York in the 1950s and 60s, but with regard to the influence of Zen Buddhism and the art scene's indebtedness to the teachings of D. T. Suzuki. Like Larson, I will consider Cage as embedded within broader ideas and urban cultural conditions in New York. But this thesis will examine the grittier underpinnings of an ambient New York — a city's technological infrastructure, which conditioned listeners and equipped musicians with tools to build new wild and open sound structures.

Between *Vexations* and *Variations VII*, Cage exemplified a radical approach to music, but he was not alone in experimenting with the minimal in New York. One can hear such an approach in the spacious, spare piano of Thelonious Monk, who realized the reflective power of post-bop blues in his and John Coltrane's 1957 rendition of "Ruby, My Dear." One can hear it in the droning art-rock of the Velvet Underground, whose 1967 song "Sister Ray" often ran thirty minutes long during live performances and contained lyrics as anarchic as its relentless, three-chord structure. Lou Reed's love song "Pale Blue Eyes" carried a different sort of stillness later in 1969, with wistful and timeless words lingering over a tambourine beat and a noodly electric guitar, but was equally austere: New York's whispered answer to the pomp and psychedelia of The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Radically open and quiet approaches could be heard in Morton Feldman's expansive symphonies, too, or some of Reich's phasing tape loops, or La Monte Young's eternal drone music.

[14] Prendergast, *Century*, 44.

Like these pioneers, Cage's experiments grew from the same musical and technological culture of New York City and its listening public, who considered and digested sound in new ways. Cage was only different in taking minimal music's guiding sensibilities to the extreme.

Take, as a final and crucial point of comparison, the move from bebop and big band to modal jazz. Jazz and improvisation after 1950 followed a trajectory parallel to, if not predating, Cage's efforts in aleatory and minimalist music.[15] As Miles Davis recounts in his autobiography, the New York trumpeter's revolutionary new musical language — in which soloists in a small ensemble shift organically in open modes rather than adhering to a key and developing chord-structure — was a dramatic alternative to East Coast bop:

> Now, in bebop, the music had a lot of notes in it. Diz and Bird played a lot of real fast notes and chord changes because that's the way they heard everything; that's the way their voices were: fast, up in the upper register. Their concept of music was more rather than *less*.
>
> I personally wanted to cut the notes down, because I've always felt that most musicians play way too much for too long...
>
> I wanted the music this new group would play to be freer, more modal, more African or Eastern, and less Western. I wanted them to go beyond themselves.[16]

On fundamental matters of musical space and complexity, Davis moved from inherited traditions. "I always listen to what I can leave out," he would say of improvisation.[17] This openness led *Kind of Blue*, the best-selling jazz album of all time, to be approached by listeners in an inverse way: "It's not insistent. You know? It doesn't make you feel a certain way," critic Terry Teachout said in a 2007 radio

[15] These sorts of connections were ignored and even disavowed by Cage, who viewed his musical methods and ideas as separate from those in black music culture. The fact that indeterminism is essentially a coded term for white, pure improvisation is vital to consider, but beyond the scope this thesis. See George Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," *Black Music Research Journal* 22 (2002).

[16] Miles Davis, *Miles: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 219-20.

[17] qtd. in Amiri Baraka. "Miles Davis: 'One of the Great Mother Fuckers'" *A Miles Davis Reader*. Ed. Bill Kirchner. (Washington and London: Smithsonian, 1997), 68.

interview. “It lets you feel the way you feel. It lets you come to it. A lot of art doesn’t do that. And *Kind of Blue* lets you do that.”[18] And, when Bill Evans turned Davis onto recordings of Ravel’s piano quartets, *Kind of Blue* found inspiration in turn-of-the-century France, too. “Miles was a crystallizer,” Evans believed, of radical ideas in jazz and classical music. “Most iconoclasts are contributors to progress … but usually it’s the person who organizes those things … the work of a few iconoclasts. One example would be Debussy and Ravel, who crystallized and brought to real refinement the raw conception that Satie had.”[19]

Why did Davis’s modal masterpiece, like Cage’s minimalist work, independently find threads in French modernism? What about New York culture had opened music of all kinds up for listeners to move through it? Let this thesis be one entryway to that broader discussion. As every musician in this period dealt with recording and transmission — sound detached from the artist’s performance space, instead filling living rooms, film soundtracks, public spaces, and headphones — Cage, who threw self-expression dramatically to the wind, brought to live audiences a vibrant reflection of a musical age in flux. Out of the tumult, Cage opened ears. “[Music] isn't useful ... unless it develops our powers of audition,” Cage believed.[20] By crystallizing and expanding listener attitudes toward sound and the artist in New York’s golden age of minimal music and audio technology, and by promoting the work and ideas of Satie, two key works show how Cage lived up to such an ideal.

[18] “American Icons: Kind of Blue,” produced by Ave Carrillo. Studio 360. *WNYC*, Feb. 2, 2007. http://www.studio360.org/2007/feb/02/kind-blue/

[19] qtd. in Ashley Kahn, *Kind of Blue* (New York: De Capo Press, 2000), 186, 187.

[20] “John Cage,” hosted by Terry Gross. Fresh Air. *WHYY*, 1982. http://www.npr.org/2012/10/26/163713450/john-cage-at-100-remembering-a-revolutionary-composer

II. *Vexations*

"I very much enjoy our current ability to listen to things for a long time
and I notice this a general practice in society."
-John Cage, BBC Radio 3, December, 1966[21]

On September 9, 1963, the doors of The Pocket Theatre in the East Village of New York City opened for the premiere of *Vexations*, one of Erik Satie's most baffling piano pieces. The performance lasted 18 hours and 40 minutes. "Whatever it was, it made musical history"[22] the *New York Times* wrote in a feature review of the event, which had been inspired by a curious note the French composer had scrawled across the one-page score: "To play this phrase 840 times in a row, it will be as well to prepare oneself in advance, and in the deepest silence, through serious immobilities."[23] John Cage, the experimental composer who had risen to fame since the premiere of his silent piece *4'33"* in 1952, took Satie's message at face value, organizing a rotating relay team of a dozen pianists to play the 80-second piece recurrently, through the night and into the next afternoon.

"Patrons may enter or leave at any time," the event's program said. "Price is always $5.00 for first admission … [Refunds will be] registered at the rate of 5¢ for each twenty minutes, with a 20¢ bonus at the end of the program for those who have remained throughout."[24] Only seven patrons arrived at the start of the performance for a chance for the maximum refund, but the audience eventually grew to 40 with various critics, artists, beatniks, and students catching parts of the titanic event, hosted in a 300-seat former movie theater. Only one person, an off-broadway actor named Karl Schenzer,

[21] Peter Dickinson, "Cage with David Sylvester and Roger Smalley," *CageTalk: Dialogues With and About Cage* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 189.
[22] Harold C. Shoenberg, et al., "Music: A Long, Long, Long Night (and Day) at the Piano," *The New York Times*, September 11, 1963, PDF, 1.
[23] Translated by Robert Orledge, "Understanding Satie's 'Vexations'," *Music & Letters*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (Aug. 1998), 386.
[24] "The Pocket Theatre Presents: "Vexations" by Erik Satie," Foundation for the Contemporary Arts, event program, September 9, 1963.

listened to the entire thing, remarking after the performance, "I feel exhilarated, not at all tired. Time? What is time? In this music the dichotomy between various aspects of art forms dissolves."[25]

"This music" refers at once to music of immense duration, but also more generally to music of simplicity, repetition, and tonal ambiguity. *Vexations* is a slow, haunting piece: a short line of listless bass notes mirrored by a segment of eerie, sharp chords adhering to no key. Composed in 1893, *Vexations* is, in the words of musicologist Robert Orledge, the "first known experiment in organized total chromaticism and continual, unrelieved dissonance, with no obvious sense of direction or tonal centre."[26] For Orledge, the piece's magical, hypnotic quality makes sense given Satie's spiritual interests; *Vexations* was composed at a time Satie was fascinated with the esoteric mystical society the Rosicrucians, Gregorian plainchant, and "the occult and ... alchemy."[27] This is one way to frame repetition in *Vexations*: as music seems to go on for eternity, listeners would "transcend the normal concepts of time and space, passing into another world of hypnotic forgetfulness and spiritual oblivion."[28] Cage, who adhered to tenets of Zen Buddhism, would have been curious about these spiritual qualities. "If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four," Cage often said, citing Zen philosophy. "If still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on ... Eventually one discovers that it's not boring at all but very interesting."[29] Directed toward a spiritual oblivion or not, the piece's monotony exemplifies a paradox often seen in the music of Cage; as bizarre procedures and atypical notation demanded an intense concentration on the part of the performer, listeners entered a conceptual

[25] Shoenberg, et al., "A Long, Long, Long Night," 1.

[26] Orledge, "Understanding," 386.

[27] Ibid.," 391. Orledge also proposes Satie was referencing the Swiss physician and alchemist Paracelsus, whose book *Coelum Philosophorum* has the subtitle *Vexationes.*

[28] Ibid., 393.

[29] John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings.* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1961), 93.

and musical space where, in boredom or serene contemplation, they opened up to ambient sound. Fundamentally, *Vexations* is an eccentric musical statement underscored by Cage's philosophical efforts to create a new listening experience.

However, even in Orledge's analysis of *Vexations*, an important fact is underplayed: the instructions scrawled across Satie's original score don't appear to be much more than a wry joke. Cage, the cheery experimentalist, had read Satie's words rather soberly, turning droll remarks into a clinically precise musical experience. "We're not supposed to laugh at Satie's music," Cage later remarked. "The textual remarks in connection with the *Vexations* are not humorous; they are in the spirit of Zen Buddhism … and it very clearly says that [the piece] is to be done 840 times."[30] But Satie, a composer with "the driest sense of humor,"[31] only suggests that *if* someone were to play the piece 840 times in a row, he or she better have a monastic commitment and concentration. There's little evidence that the repetitions actually need to be carried out. And what can be made of the very title *Vexations*, which suggests Satie wanted to put listeners and performers in a state of anxiety as much as he wanted to induce Zen-like, serene rumination? Satie's own words, collected by Satie historian and archivist Ornella Volta, shed light on the issue. A characteristically sardonic note titled "A Simple Question," likely dating from the early 1910s, was unpublished but transcribed by Satie's brother Conrad:

> Which do you prefer:
> Music or Ham?
> It seems this is a question one should ask oneself when the *hors d'oeurves* arrive.
> In many places sweet and excellent silence has been replaced by bad music. It is thought smart by most people to hear falsely pretty things, and listen to silly, vaguely

[30] John Cage, Roger Shattuck, and Alan Gillmor, "Erik Satie: a Conversation," *Contact* 25 (1982): 24.
[31] Kahn, *Noise,* 247.

> churchy ritornellos, while they drink a beer or try on a pair of trousers; to appear to appreciate the sonorous tribute of basses and bassoons, and other ugly-pipes, while thinking of nothing at all.
>
> Peuh! All this is pretty painful for a man of my age; this kind of musical Dufayelisation makes me choke.
>
> The remedy? Heavy taxes; terrible vexations; severe repression. Cruel torture, even.[32]

Satie packs this short excerpt with some hard-hitting cultural criticism; he singles out Dufayelis, pioneer of the department store and shopping catalogue, as a pinnacle of decadence and banality in the *fin-de-siècle* — an end of a century apparently bogged down by saccharine musical traditions and complacent, bourgeois attitudes. The general thinking and humor here, nearly bordering sadism, likely informed Satie's remark on *Vexations* back in 1893: absurd punishment for an absurd musical age, delivered blithely.

Does Cage's straight-faced reading of Satie in some way reverse its intent, by draining its humor and enthroning it as conceptual art? These concerns speak to some common critiques of Cage, which the musicologist Richard Taruskin brings together in an essay, "No ear for music: the scary purity of John Cage."[33] He argues that Cage's child-like adventures in deflating music and subverting self-expression were actually humorless efforts that did little to mitigate the composer's presence. Cage's *Vexations*, like his seminal silent piece *4'33"*, may have attempted to rid the expressive artist as a point of focus; its monotonous structure and lack of spectacle directed listeners' attentions away from the stage toward surrounding noise or their own wandering minds. But as the mastermind behind these sorts of bold events, Cage became a deist God for all musical sound thereafter. Alex Ross has put this

[32] Erik Satie, *A Mammal's Notebook: The Collected Writings of Erik Satie*, ed. Ornella Volta, trans. Anthony Melville (London: Atlas Press, 1996), 105-6.

[33] Richard Taruskin, "No ear for music: the scary purity of John Cage," *The New Republic*, March 15, 2012, PDF.

maneuver well:

> He accomplished something like a colossal land grab, annexing the entire landscape of sound, from pure noise to pure silence. If you hear several radios playing together, it sounds like Cage. If the P.A. system makes a horrible noise during a lecture, it sounds like Cage ... Because Cage made his music sound like the world, the world sounds like Cage. It's a neat trick, and it could be done only once.[34]

Where Ross is much fonder of Cage, Taruskin describes an "ascetic" and "literalistic" Cage, a "master of blague" who not only misread Satie, but "subscribed to ... the singular bedrock tenet of Western art, [and] brought it to its purest, scariest peak … What he was not was legit."[35] Taruskin's historical reframing of Cage is intense and there's an aesthetic debate here over whether Cage, in his big, land-grabbing trick, was elevating noise into the Western music canon or light-heartedly bringing music down to earth. But these concerns ignore actual reception; whether or not Cage missed the joke by turning quirky remarks into solemn orders, he framed and executed *Vexations* so that some listeners, including Cage, found profound meaning.

On the night of the performance, the *New York Times* sent an eight-piece relay team to cover the event. Critics encountered music that seemed to blend with the atmosphere, evoking a spaciousness best suited for reflection rather than interpretation or close attention. The influential music writer Harold C. Schonberg, who reviewed the first and last hours of the event for the *Times*, described this unique experience in terms of mechanical repetition and cyclical Buddhist prayer:

> Note succeeded note: implacably, doggedly, swinging back and forth like the windshield wiper of an automobile, and staying in much the same orbit. Base line, tritones, bass line, tritones.

[34] Alex Ross, "The John Cage Century," *The New Yorker*, September 4, 2012. http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/09/john-cage-at-100.html

[35] Taruskin, 1. Taruskin's observations about the score of *4'33"* are funny and notable: "The space on its pages, measured from left to right, corresponds to the elapsing time. Most of the pages have vertical lines drawn on them, denoting the chance calculated time articulations on which the duration of the piece depends. One of the pages, bypassed by these markers, remains blank. If copyrighting a blank page is not modernist chutzpah, I don't know what is," 12.

> Time meant nothing, and the listener floated in a suspended animation as seconds flowed into minutes with the idiot repetition of beat after beat. Nirvana? Shantih, shantih, shantih...[36]

The critic Howard Klein offered similar praise, expanding on these atmospheric, suspending, and introspective qualities. The piece's inherent difficulty, Klein also pointed out, inhibits the performer's ability to express oneself; the whims and flourishes of musicians are restricted by Satie's unorthodox notation and the melody's unpredictable nature. Given that Klein even performed that evening when a pianist failed to show, his words are especially valuable:

> The hypnotic music provides a point of concentration, which, being of such a fragile, unresolved character, the mind is led deep into oneself.
>
> While actually playing, the mind is similarly freed. There are almost no possibilities of expression. The consciousness is deflected from the mechanics of playing to the inner state of balance, which, in response to the calming effect, is poised as if suspended ... The experience is dreamlike.

Audience members at The Pocket Theatre, too, were said to be in "a silent cocoon of contemplation."[37] And at least after 10 p.m., many patrons treated *Vexations* as background music, reading and writing in their seats as the pianists played on and on. Some drifted to sleep. One young Columbia business student pulled out his accountancy homework during the piece. Another student, James Lee, perused an issue of *Die Reihe*, a German music journal edited by Karl Stockhausen and Herbert Eimert, featuring essays from Pierre Boulez, and others.

What was James Lee reading? *Reports / Analyses*, the most recent English-translated issue of *Die Reihe* in circulation at the time of Cage's *Vexations*, happens to feature literature relevant to the performance. The book contains a rare lecture by Cage on indeterminacy, which Hans Günter Helms

[36] Shoenberg, et al., "A Long, Long, Long Night," 1.

[37] Ibid., 1.

transcribed. In the spirit of Cage — a composer contemptuous of harmony[38] but enthusiastic of structure and duration — Helms had organized the lecture into blocks of text to be read in precisely minute-long blocks. Perhaps Lee was reading each paragraph in sync with the repeated piano motif. As the eerie, diminished theme of *Vexations* orbited around the theater, Lee might have been learning about Harvard University's anechoic chamber, a totally soundless, echo-proof room, where Cage discovered that one can never truly hear silence: "I heard two sounds: one high and one low."[39] Cage was hearing his nervous and circulatory systems. Or Lee may been absorbed in Cage's loose explanation of indeterminate music, especially pertinent in The Pocket Theatre that night:

> Down in Greensboro, North Carolina, David Tudor and I gave an interesting program. We played five pieces three times each. They were Klavierstück XI by Karlheinz Stockhausen, Christian Wolff's Duo for Pianists[40], Morton Feldman's Intermission No. 6, Earle Brown's Four Systems and my Variations. All of these pieces are composed in various ways ... Each performance is unique, as interesting to the composers and performers as to the audience. Everyone in fact, that is, becomes a listener. I explained all this to the audience ... that one is accustomed to thinking of a piece of music as an object suitable for understanding and subsequent evaluation, but that here the situation was quite the other.

Cage concludes:

> These pieces, I said, are not objects but processes essentially purposeless ... I said that since sounds were sounds this gave people hearing them the chance to be people, centered within themselves where they actually are, not off artificially in the distance as they are accustomed to be, trying to figure out what is being said by some artist by means of sounds.[41]

Amidst Satie's atmospheric tune and Cage's written world, lush with praise of sounds of the body,

[38] "Cage saw harmony as one of the means Germanic orchestral music used to impose their importance by making sounds *big,*" to "enlarge audiences and increase box office returns" Kahn, *Noise,* 186, 231.

[39] John Cage, "Indeterminacy," in *Die Reihe: Reports / Analyses*, ed. Herbert Eimert and Karlheinz Stockhausen (King of Prussia, PA: Theodore Presser Co., 1961), 115.

[40] Wolff and Tudor were members of the dozen pianists playing that night.

[41] Cage, "Indeterminacy," 116.

jukeboxes, and traffic — sounds-in-themselves — Lee must have vividly understood: music is everywhere.

Or perhaps Lee was reading Stockhausen, the groundbreaking composer of electronic music who in that issue of *Die Reihe* describes historical efforts in the West to create "architectural" or "spatial" music, music composed with the area around a listener in mind. Urging acousticians and architects to provide "a badly-needed solution of current problems" in music, Stockhausen proposes an ideal listening space:

> My idea would be to have a spherical chamber, fitted all around with loudspeakers. In the middle of this spherical chamber, a platform, transparent to both light and sound, would be hung for listeners. They could hear music, composed for such adapted halls, coming from above, from below and from all directions … There would be continuous programmes, changing at regular intervals, and one could hear the electronic programme at any time of day. [42]

This futuristic musical installation, Stockhausen explains, aimed to put listeners "in a state of suspended animation" where "the music 'stands still'."[43]

While Lee may have pondered a similar stillness in the music of *Vexations*, which had led patrons to feel "suspended" as well, he would have been hard pressed to find such an immersive experience at The Pocket, "one of the oldest theaters in town."[44] The auditorium, built in 1860 as the Sans Souci music hall and converted in 1914 to a popular movie theater, The Comet, was reestablished as a hangout for bohemian moviegoers and concertgoers in 1962, when it was refurbished as The Pocket Theater.[45] It began showing contemporary opera, avant-garde music, and off-broadway plays,

[42] Karlheinz Stockhausen, "Two Lectures," in *Die Reihe: Reports / Analyses*, ed. Herbert Eimert and Karlheinz Stockhausen (King of Prussia, PA: Theodore Presser Co., 1961), 69.

[43] Stockhausen, "Two Lectures," 69.

[44] "'Perils of Pauline' Back at Comet in New York After 33-Year Span," *Boxoffice Magazine,* June 28, 1947, 76.

[45] "'Group Soup' Shifts Theaters," *The New York Times*, November 30, 1962, PDF.

and likely maintained acoustic features from The Comet, for which sound had been wired in 1929. And, as seen in the *Times'* photography, the theater maintained its classic, cinema-style cushioned seating: ideal for individual "cocoon[s] of contemplation."

Whether or not Lee was reading these essays (although conceivably he could have read every published word of *Die Reihe* that night), patrons generally seemed to oscillate between meditative, inward concentration and attention divided. Their ears were open to the music, but they felt at ease to move around, read, and write. Listeners were not intensely focused on the stage. It's fascinating how critics, in this mode of listening, were especially attentive to ambient sound; the *Times* wrote a music review, but still found it necessary to recount the "infiltration of street noises," the "click of a photographer's camera," and, most vividly, "the accompaniment of the grrr of the cooling system and the occasional rattle of a morning newspaper."[46] Something about the environment and general audience expectations had led listeners to contemplate a wide soundscape that included surrounding noises. Satie's melodies may not have delivered any message, or expressed a particular feeling, but it was creating an atmospheric space in which listeners, to quote Cage again, could be "centered within themselves where they actually are, not off artificially in the distance as they are accustomed to be."

Others were not so convinced. Leighton Kerner, writing for the *Village Voice*, granted Satie's repeated motif was a "soothing fragment," but remained undecided as to whether the marathon version resembled "a session of hypnosis, the Chinese water torture, or an experience inviting sublime meditation."[47] *The New Yorker* forewent reviewing *Vexations*, but in a music feature that week subtitled, "It Just Is—or Is It?," Winthrop Sargeant wavered on the broader question of

[46] Shoenberg, et al., "A Long, Long, Long Night," 1-2.
[47] Leighton Werner, "Vexations & A Pleasure," *The Village Voice*, September 12, 1963, 14.

anti-teleological music, music that "is not going anywhere."[48] He gives an open-minded account of some similar works by Cage and La Monte Young, praising their wildly experimental concerts. But after hearing pieces by Morton Feldman, Ornette Coleman, and Earle Brown, he writes: "I confess, with some shame, that I was unable to tell one from another."[49] And, in a rather backhanded compliment later, Sargeant admits these "purposeless" pieces were "a good deal less boring" than he expected. Raymond Ericson, a writer for *The New York Times*, was transfixed by *Vexations*, but all the while thought, "Is this what the ice-cream vendors go through who cruise the streets in wagons playing the same tune over and over again? … The paradox of being irritated and hypnotized by the music at the same time continues."[50]

These more leery reactions took shape in a curious episode a week after the concert, when Cage's world came in direct contact with the mainstream. It was September 16, 1963 and on *I've Got a Secret*, a hokey CBS game show in which a panel of celebrities attempted to guess contestants' extraordinary attributes or feats, host Garry Moore brought on Schenzer and a young John Cale. Cale, who would go on to help form The Velvet Underground, had performed as part of the relay-team of pianists at The Pocket. The artists whispered into Moore's ear their "related secrets," which were broadcast to the audience on title cards. Cale said, "I performed in a concert that lasted 18 HOURS," while Schenzer claimed, "I'm the only person who sat through the entire performance."[51] The panel, which included celebrities Bill Cullen, Henry Morgan, Betsy Palmer, and Jayne Meadows, engaged in a

[48] Winthrop Sargeant, "Musical Events: It Just Is—or Is It?," September 14, 1963, 121.

[49] Sargeant, "It Just Is," 121.

[50] Shoenberg, et al., "A Long, Long, Long Night," 2.

[51] *I've Got a Secret*, Cale and Schenzer, television program first broadcast September 16, 1963 by CBS. Available online: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mqO-xsRyTM

freeform, 20-Questions-style interrogation to find out what Schenzer and Cale, introduced as an actor and an anonymous Welsh musician, Mr. X, respectively, were hiding. Despite some very awkward cultural dissonance, the guessing game illustrated a key moment in the public's understanding of music, Cage, and the avant-garde. After establishing that the secret involved a "regular musical instrument," Palmer imagined Cale and Schenzer had engaged in a feat involving some long-distance technology:

> Palmer: "You played something, and Mr. Schenzer received it in a strange way?"
> [*some laughter from the audience*]
> Moore: "He received it."
> Palmer: "He received it –"
> Moore: "He received it, but not in a strange way if you're thinking, you know, did he listen to it by a –"
> Palmer: "Well, did Mr. X play it in Wales, say, for instance, and did Mr. Schenzer receive it somewhere else in the world?"

The soft-spoken Cale replied, "No." With the sound of a buzzer, questioning moved to the comedian and former radio personality Henry Morgan, who upheld the hypothesis some technological feat was at hand:

> Henry: "Mr. X, did you record this?"
> Cale: "No."
> Henry: "Did you do it on, um, radio?"
> Cale: "No."
> Henry: "Was Mr. Schenzer in the area when you did it?"
> Cale: "Yes."
> Henry: "Was he in Wales?"
> Cale: "No."
> Henry: "Did you do it in this country?"
> Cale: "Yes"
> Henry: "And he was in the same room?"
> Cale: "Yes."

Strikingly, both Palmer and Henry knew Cale was a pianist, but didn't ask much about music or instrumentation: they imagined Cale accomplished something involving long-distance transmission.

Palmer and Henry's wild stabs act as small glimpses of how New Yorkers imagined music: invisible, its source distant. As Henry's last question demonstrates, the last thing they expect is that Cale and Schenzer were in the same room.

At this point, Meadows figured that the two artists had something to do with a 19-hour-long feat of "endurance" she had read about in a newspaper article, likely the feature piece in the *New York Times*. Moore, the host, erupted with congratulations, summarized for the audience the historic musical event, complete with its "unusual system" of refunds, and then interviewed the two contestants:

> Moore: "Mr. Schenzer, surely this refund wasn't, uh, sufficient inducement to keep you there all that time."
> Schenzer: "No, Gary, it wasn't. Actually it was quite a simple reason. I just wanted to give myself to the composer's work, for that was the only way in which I could judge it. And I would like to say that I feel it was an extremely important concert because this concert was sponsored by the work of several artists, painters, and sculptors, who feel that the contemporary performing artist is not receiving a share in American culture today."

Schenzer referenced the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts, founded that year by a collective of young artists including Cage, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Elaine de Kooning. *Vexations* was one of the first projects funded through one of the non-profit's "benefit exhibitions" to promote contemporary art, and it would go on to help organize *Variations VII*. Moore followed up: "Did you find yourself going to sleep at anytime, Karl?" "Uh, two or three times I was close," Schenzer replied, smiling, "But not really."

When Moore asked Cale, "What would move a man to say you must play it 840 times for it to be complete?" The composer answered, "I have no idea." Cale, like Cage, did not give credence to the possible nuances of Satie's remark. In Cale's view, Satie said the performer must repeat the phrase. Taruskin seems to be on point here; Cale and Schenzer spoke very seriously about the performance,

and each of their responses had a tinge of defensiveness. Whether Cale and Schenzer were reluctant or unable to elaborate on Cage's event, or whether, simply, Moore was a poor interviewer — he did have a habit of asking yes-or-no questions — is unclear, but the second half of the show remained as stilted. When Cale ushered himself to the piano for an abbreviated, demonstrative performance, the host began another abrupt conversation with Schenzer:

> Moore: "Mr. Schenzer, do you think you can stand to hear this again?"
> Schenzer: "I'd love to."
> Moore: "After hearing it 840 times, can you hum some of it to us?"
> Schenzer: [pause] "Mmm – I'm afraid I can't, no."
> Schenzer: [*laughs, Schenzer is silent*] "Well, let's hear 1/840th of this composition."

Schenzer does little to try and describe the piece's elusive quality; Cale, Orledge, and others have since written about how the piece, without a semblance of singable melody, is very difficult to memorize. But instead, Schenzer essentially cut himself off from conversation. And while the hot studio lights and arsenal of live television cameras probably didn't make for the ideal listening space, Schenzer's hermetic attitude only intensified as Cale began to play.

In the video of the episode, Cale's playing is rigid and even, without crescendo or other romantic dynamics. Hunched over the piano with a dark velvet suit and thick-rimmed glasses, he looks rather like a lab scientist. The music sounds as strange and familiar as ever. There's a shadow of Miles Davis' modal *Kind of Blue* number "All Blues" in *Vexations*, although somehow broken to its fundamental melodic chunks and scattered across empty space. Piano notes occasionally come together in moments of discord or beauty, but they have been drained of all sensuousness and direction. If notes seem to climb or yearn, then it is only for a second before they trail off. Schenzer, unlike everyone else on camera, does not watch Cale. He clasps his hands and looks off vacantly, unmindful of the

performer. As people realize the piece has repeated, a few chuckles emerge from the audience and the camera scans over the panelists, who, peering toward the piano, seem curious and delighted by Cale's playing. (Except Henry, who looks as if he's hearing a bad joke.) The camera cuts to a long shot of Schenzer, still apparently in deep concentration. Moore stands up next to Cale when the piece ends:

> Moore: "It kind of, uh, doesn't resolve itself in the end ... But I guess there's no rule that says it has to resolve itself, is there?"
> Cale: "No."
> Moore: "Now I was curious about one thing, now you played this yourself several hundred times. I noticed you're still reading the music."
> Cale: "Yes."
> Moore: "You didn't memorize it?"
> Cale: "No, I couldn't."
> Moore: "It is a difficult piece –"
> Cale: "Yes."
> Moore: "To remember."
> Cale: "In a way, yes."

Moore counters Cale's reserved manner with a forceful laugh, and proudly declares his philistinism: "Well you know with my tin ear, I wouldn't know. Thank you, Mr. Cale, very very much. You have a whim of iron."

On one level, this episode of *I've Got a Secret* exhibits, through Cale and Schenzer, some evidence of the sort of clinical, humorless attitudes among experimental circles that Taruskin critiqued. Yet despite some cultural dissonance, the show demonstrates how Satiean ideas about non-developmental music were successfully being received by the public. As Dutch composer and author Reinbert de Leeuw has said, *Vexations* is the pinnacle of Satie's "refusal to develop a musical idea, a static conception of music."[52] And despite the "tin ear" of Moore, he acknowledges and

[52] "Reinbert de Leeuw, 1983," Speaking of Music (radio program), *KPFA*, November 10, 1983, http://radiom.org/detail.php?omid=SOM.1983.11.10.

understands that *Vexations* doesn't resolve. On a broader level, the episode exhibits a high-water mark in news coverage of Cage during the 1960s. His music had entered the "horizon of expectations," to use a term from historian James Johnson.[53] Not to say the piece's premiere reflected a widespread love of 19-hour concerts, but the fact New York received *Vexations* and engaged with its avant-garde performers on mass media speaks to a degree of expanded expectations among the listening public.

Following Johnson's approach to a cultural history of listening, *Vexations* and its response must be understood as structured by social, personal, and technological influences in New York City:

> The way audiences have listened over time can be generalized according to these sorts of categories: sounds, images, ideas, emotions, vague feelings, and so forth. It is also possible to sketch the process by which a cohort of spectators passes from one type of listening to another. … Set in the stream of time, listening becomes a dialectic between aesthetic expectations and musical innovations. It is a continuous negotiation conducted at the boundaries of musical sense. Change occurs when music accessible enough to meet listeners' criteria for meaning is at the same time innovative enough to prod them into revising and expanding those assumptions.[54]

In the "dialectic between aesthetic expectations and musical innovations," Cage stood on the fringe of New York society, but his experiments and ideas — having successfully entered mass media in the 1960s — pulled public expectations in a new direction. Johnson, taking the position that musical meaning is unfixed, imagines just how incomprehensible the conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp would seem to a viewer from the classical era. The leap is useful to carry further into the world of Cage: if we were to pluck a Parisian listener out of the Paris Opéra, fresh off the rush of Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, and transfer him to The Pocket Theater, he would likely meet *Vexations* with a blank stare. *Times* reviewers may have been deeply conscious of a room rich with ambient noises and

[53] James Johnson, *Listening in Paris*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
[54] Ibid., 2-3.

dreamy, reflective music, but this time-traveling friend, with bearings constructed in France's high-romantic period, would end up searching the stage in vain. His ears, primed for the sorts of cathartic narratives and complex harmonies that evoked a *vague des passions* in Berlioz — a passion so consuming it verges on illness — would be dramatically outmoded in the near-nothingness of Satie's music.

However, in one way, the experience of listening to *Vexations* reflected further individuation and self-reflection in the vein of the romantic tradition. "Music alone has the power of throwing us back on ourselves," French novelist Honoré de Balzac declared in 1837, words still relevant among people inwardly reflecting on Satie's repeating melody.[55] But listeners were no longer as absorbed or impassioned as they might be hearing Berlioz or Stravinsky. Confronted by monotony, listeners became careless of the stage or self-reflective within the music's atmosphere. The resultant non-attachment to music is a dramatic break from the attitudes of listeners of the Paris Opéra or Boston's Symphony Hall, homes to a "musical culture that was religious in its intensity" and in which "[l]istening became a way to worship at the temple of great art."[56] One can't quite imagine someone in Bayreuth doing his homework in the middle of *Tristan und Isolde*.

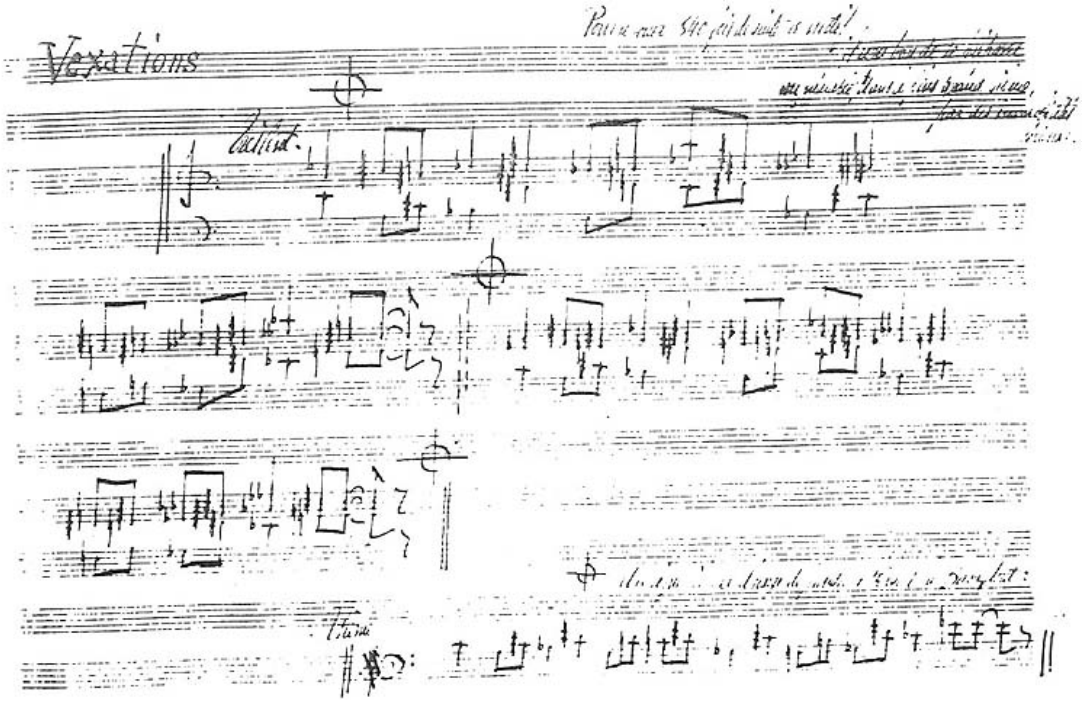
Cage himself remarked that, with *Vexations*, "Something had been set in motion that went far beyond what any of us had expected."[57] On September 11, 1963, a day after the performance, he explained "I felt different than I had ever felt before … I had changed and the world had changed. … Other people who had been in it wrote to me or called me up and said they had the same experience."[58]

[55] Honoré de Balzac, *Gambara*, trans. Clara Bell and James Waring, (Gloucester, U.K.: Dodo Press, 2006), 26.
[56] Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 47.
[57] qtd. in John Cage, Roger Shattuck, and Alan Gillmor, "Erik Satie: a Conversation," *Contact* 25 (1982): 23.
[58] Ibid., 23.

We can counterpose these transformative, meditative experiences with the utterly detached experience of others treating *Vexations* as background music. In the perpetual moment of stillness that was *Vexations*, audiences were at once deeply engaged and passive with music. The event may have been a caricature of Satie's music, but Cage had parlayed the piece in a way that resonated in complex, unforeseen ways.



(Clockwise from top-left: Off-broadway actor Karl Schenzer, left, and I've Got a Secret *host Gary Moore listen to "Vexations," performed by John Cale, off-right; comedian Henry Morgan reacts as "Vexations" repeats; Cale performs Satie's one-page score, pictured below; actress Betsy Palmer concentrates on Erik Satie's music.)*



III. "Music You Can Live in, Like a House"
Reading Satie in New York

"Is Satie relevant in mid-century?" John Cage asked in *Silence*. Cage understood how "*Le bon Maître's* harmonies, melodies, and rhythms" were simply "no longer of interest" in the dominant musical climate of atonality and serialism.[59] How, then, could Satie's simple piano sketches, sardonic writings, and eccentric, noise-making operas ever hold weight alongside the calculated harmonic systems and grand unities of Arnold Schoenberg's twelve-tone scale, so popular among composers in the first half of the twentieth century? Cage offered a resounding conclusion later in the essay: "It's not a question of relevance. He's indispensable." Cage had been a student of Schoenberg during the 1930s in Los Angeles, but Satie's radical creative spark had led Cage eventually to dismiss harmonic "ideas of order, expressions of sentiment, and all the rest of our inherited aesthetic claptrap."[60] As understood in mid-century America, Satie carried in him far more important sensibilities, of space, noise, and music-as-process. This section will examine two analogous, American views of Satie — Cage's musical one and Roger Shattuck's historical one — as windows into a Satie whose forward thinking in these areas changed approaches to listening.[61]

Satie's refusal to categorize himself landed him a vague place in mainstream music history. Born in 1866 in the seaport of Honfleur, Normandy, the French musician had about every modernist school, from impressionism to dadaism, projected onto him by critics, historians, and musicians. The popular, contemporary view of Satie (a delicate and eccentric café pianist, some sort of weird cousin of Claude

[59] Cage, *Silence*, 77, 78.

[60] Ibid., 82.

[61] For an extensive survey of Satie's influence on Cage, see Matthew Shlomowitz, "Cage's Place in the Reception of Satie" (PhD diss., University of California, 1999). Available online at http://www.satie-archives.com/web/article8.html.

Debussy) often seems at odds with the Satie who rose to fame in the 1910s beyond the piano (a mercurial recluse who brought us the ballet *Parade*, for instance — a noise-filled, anarchic homage to ragtime that features accompaniment by a typewriter and set designs by Pablo Picasso). Caught between starkly different times in France — the atmosphere of *la belle époque*, with its perfumed rooms, bicycle-filled streets, and twee, pointillist landscapes, and the Paris of World War I, fraught with violence and a wholesale rejection of logic, tradition, and the bourgeoisie — there's the sense Satie is unfit for his own time. Cage attempted to synthesize contradictory views in mid-century.

Truthfully, Satie belonged to all and none of the modernist movements of his day. His music was never quite as pretty as Debussy's, nor was it ever as politically nihilistic as Dada. Despite some affection for nearly every up-and-coming French aesthetic school between 1880 and 1920, Satie rejected neat labels. "There is no school of Satie," the composer wrote in a 1920 issue of Jean Cocteau's single-sheet art magazine, *Le Coq*. "*Satisme* could never exist. It would find me against it."[62] Satie tread a dangerous line. With an unyielding irony, disdain for convention, and a refusal to explain himself, the composer essentially relegated himself to the sidelines of the classical music canon. Maurice Ravel and Debussy, friends and admirers of the composer, would fold Satie's wild sensibilities into a polished aesthetic and, as respected figureheads of early-twentieth-century French music, come to symbolize a turn from the popular harmonic and operatic styles of German-romantic music. Satie's hallmark 12 identical velvet suits, his fetish for collecting umbrellas, and a carefully contrived eccentric personality in public and in writing didn't help his reputation within the mainstream. Nevertheless, Cage thought, Satie subverted Wagner's wearisome musical supremacy in a more fundamental manner. As

[62] Satie, *Notebook,* 151.

historian Alan Gillmor remarks, "Many of Satie's disciples — the Americans Virgil Thompson and Ned Rorem, for example — admired the composer for his Gallic playfulness, for the guileless simplicity of his musical language, and the vigour with which he denied the virtues of Germanic art."[63] Cage, however, heard something else:

> ...from the moment he discovered the Sage of Arcueil, [Cage] admired his extraordinary abnegation of the will and sensed a profound humanism aimed at liberating man from the artificial barriers with which he has shut himself off from life. … for Cage the French composer's career was an elaborate attempt to tear down not just the walls of tradition and convention but all the barriers that separate art from life. … It would seem that a nihilistic impulse is at the root of [Satie]. … But — and this is the crucial link between Satie and Cage — the passion for destruction is also a creative passion."[64]

Ravel and Debussy made important leaps in composition and technique, cultivating atmosphere and stillness in some ways that Satie never achieved. But Cage heard the Montmartre pianist go further, discreetly shifting traditional roles of artist, music, and society and foreshadowing new modes of listening for the "ambient century."

Cage's radical Satie can be heard even in the early tripartite piano works, the *Sarabandes* (1887), *Gymnopédies* (1888), and *Gnossiennes* (1893). Perhaps the composer's best-known piece, the first *Gymnopédie*, was written when the composer was just 22. The piece opens with two chords, more or less D major, in a low, Dorian mode. The main, melancholy theme circles above in a slow music-box fashion, shifting between light, dark, and vaguely Eastern moods to a gorgeous, motionless effect. In a mirrored A A' B C D / A A' B C D' structure, the first *Gymnopédie* reinforces a lack of movement with circularity; the second part differs only by its final minor, rather than major, chord. The dissonances of the chords and the distances between them are sad but distant: notes serve as outlines,

[63] Alan Gillmor, "Satie, Cage, and the New Aestheticism," *Contact* 25 (1982), 19.
[64] Ibid., 19-20.

hinting at sadness or nostalgia without ever prescribing feelings through drama. For the first time, "repetition and juxtaposition of musical ideas [were] a compositional technique ... a substitute for dramatic development."[65] Composer Reinbert de Leeuw suggested that Satie "began music history all over again"[66] with these piano works, a sort of blank-slate view that is often prescribed to Cage.[67] Historian of the French avant-garde Roger Shattuck heard "hauntingly simple" pieces and in *The Banquet Years* (1958) wrote that Satie had "found his first original style, a blend of boldness and timidity which equalize each other so completely that the music seems to move at a standstill. These early piano compositions are contemporary with the late works of Brahms and Verdi, yet in comparison Satie's music reaches out to us from another century — the ninth or the twentieth … the simplest passages convey the greatest freshness."[68]

The Banquet Years emerged as an essential history of the French avant-garde for the 1960s, providing an articulate historical backdrop parallel to Cage's discovery and promotion of Satie. Cage and Shattuck were not strangers. The two met at least once for a taped conversation in Stony Point, New York in 1973 along with Gillmor, where they pondered questions about Satie's humor, the marathon performance of *Vexations*, and ambient noise for the Canadian Broadcasting Company. In that conversation, Shattuck remarked, "...[M]uch of what Satie is doing is aesthetically — well, it's just like the things we're hearing in the background ... here we sit with a tape recorder going and everything

[65] Alan M. Gillmor, *Erik Satie* (Boston: Twayne, 1988), 42.

[66] "Reinbert de Leeuw, 1983," Speaking of Music (radio program), *KPFA*, November 10, 1983, http://radiom.org/detail.php?omid=SOM.1983.11.10. Qtd. in Ross, *The Rest is Noise*.

[67] Cage agreed when Gillmor suggested a declaration from Virgil Thompson applied to Cage, too: "Of all the influential composers of our time, an influence even his detractors cannot deny him, Satie is the only one whose works can be enjoyed and appreciated without any knowledge of the history of music," qtd. in John Cage, et. al, "Erik Satie," 21.

[68] Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years* (Toronto: Random House, 1968), 120.

against us in the way of lawnmowers and children swimming in the brook next to us."[69] Cage agreed; Satie's importance lies in the ambient — how his music is "open to the environment."[70] The three came to the conclusion that there are two sides to Satie's art of stillness. One is this composer of *musique d'ameublement*, a functional background music that acts as furniture and purposefully evades direct listening. Another side of Satie is the composer of a deeply intimate and contemplative form of music that, by virtue of incredibly involved and unorthodox scores, demands intense concentration on the part of performers and listeners. This paradoxical combination, extremely relevant to the conceptual and experimental music of Cage, is explored at length in *The Banquet Years*.

Satie's structure and style — with the unpredictability, simplicity, and stillness that became meaningful for Cage — defied traditional concert listening by virtue of form. Shattuck elaborates:

> A strictly classical symphony, a work of symmetrical movement and proportion, lays out its course in its first few pages—even in the first several measures. The themes, the tempi, the tonality are defined or suggested; the possible variations are limited by convention; the elapsed time will fall between ten and thirty minutes. We do not know how the composer will cover it, but we have a general idea of the course. … Increasingly with Beethoven, Brahms, and Wagner, the course opens out into a cross-country—travel across unexplored areas where the terrain cannot be predicted. Yet one feels the reality of their progress across solid ground, where musical analysis can follow and survey the advance.[71]

David Toop employed a similar metaphor when he spoke of ambient sound and music in 1995 as "a conjured place through which the music moves and the listener can wander."[72] Shattuck's landscape analogy continues:

> Satie ... abandoned dry land. It is as if he spent his life watching the waves breaking on a tiny section of shore, fascinated by both the monotony and the variety of their fall.

[69] John Cage, et. al, "Erik Satie," 22.

[70] Ibid., 22.

[71] Shattuck, *Banquet*, 140.

[72] Toop, *Ocean*, i.

> Form in Satie means neither a course nor a drifting. It is a fascination with a series of points which turn out to be one point. His music progresses by standing still. … Fragmentary mosaic construction, approaching extreme brevity, and experiments with pure sonority exclude development.[73]

The humble Montmartre piano player collapsed time and space with short piano pieces, bringing a deep sense of immobility and circularity into a single point; Cage's performance of *Vexations* dramatically realized those "waves breaking on a tiny section of shore." Such simplicity had long prompted doubts of Satie's talent. When, for example, Satie attended the Paris Conservatoire in 1879 before dropping out, professors' reports agreed: Satie "has tone quality," "beautiful sonority," and "no lack of grace or natural talent," but that the pianist was ultimately "ordinary," "uneven," "feeble," "incapable of sight-reading," and, according to one teacher, "the laziest student in the Conservatoire."[74] For Satie, however, biographical quirks and "technical incapacities" were consciously transformed "into a virtue, thus creating a unique body of music that succeeded in penetrating the lingering mists of Bayreuth," as Gillmor suggests in the preface to his biography. "Satie emerges, in the harsher light of the postmodern era, as a more forward-looking figure than many a more famous and polished contemporary."[75] The "deceptive naiveté" Satie championed in his music, life, and philosophy was deliberated as part of a wholesale revolt on the concert hall's airs.[76]

For Cage, one of Satie's more enduring influences lay in innovating a musical space alternative to that of a symphony-concert. Satie remarked: "I am not a musician... I class myself a phonometrographer,"[77] a made-up sort of technician who measures notes and judges their value based

[73] Shattuck, *Banquet*, 140-41.

[74] Robert Orledge, *Satie Remembered* (Portland, Or.: Amadeus, 1995), 11-2.

[75] Gillmor, *Satie*, x.

[76] Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 139.

[77] Erik Satie, "Memoirs of an Amnesiac," *The Writings of Erik Satie*, ed. Nigel Wilkins (London: Eulenburg Books, 1980), 58.

on size. Satie also said, "Before I compose a piece, I walk round it several times, accompanied by myself."[78] Although joking, the implied detachment to music as a structure — sound already existing in space — was real and central to Satie. As a composer, he presented audiences with a self-sustaining, spacious work. Never does he speak from within. As a listener too, Satie set himself apart from the audible: able to measure or wander around sound as if it were ready-made. Cage took Satie's structural approach to mean an emphasis on duration, the bottom line for silence, music, and noise; a vessel of time acted as a bordered space for listeners to become set within themselves and acknowledge ambient sound. "A time that's just time will let sounds be just sounds," Cage wrote in *Silence*. "And if they are folk tunes, unresolved ninth chords, or knives and forks, just folk tunes, unresolved ninth chords, or knives and forks."[79] For all of Cage's insights into Satie's use of ambience, his understanding is a little forgiving. Michael Nyman distinguishes the two: "Their awareness of the usefulness of environmental noise-sounds leads in opposite directions. For Satie, furniture music would be 'part of the noises of the environment,' whereas for Cage the noises of the environment are part of his music."[80] Despite this, Cage heard Satie building rather than evoking, bringing an unprecedented architectural sense to music. Satie's structures are solid yet breezy, open to environmental sound as well as "folk tunes, musical clichés, and absurdities of all kinds. … He is not ashamed to welcome them in the house he builds."[81]

The architectural, anti-impressionist image of Satie was not entirely unique to the mid-century. In 1915, when a 26-year-old Cocteau met Satie after hearing a performance of the masterful *3 Morceaux* (1903) for four hands, the esteemed poet, filmmaker, writer, and playwright recognized the distinct

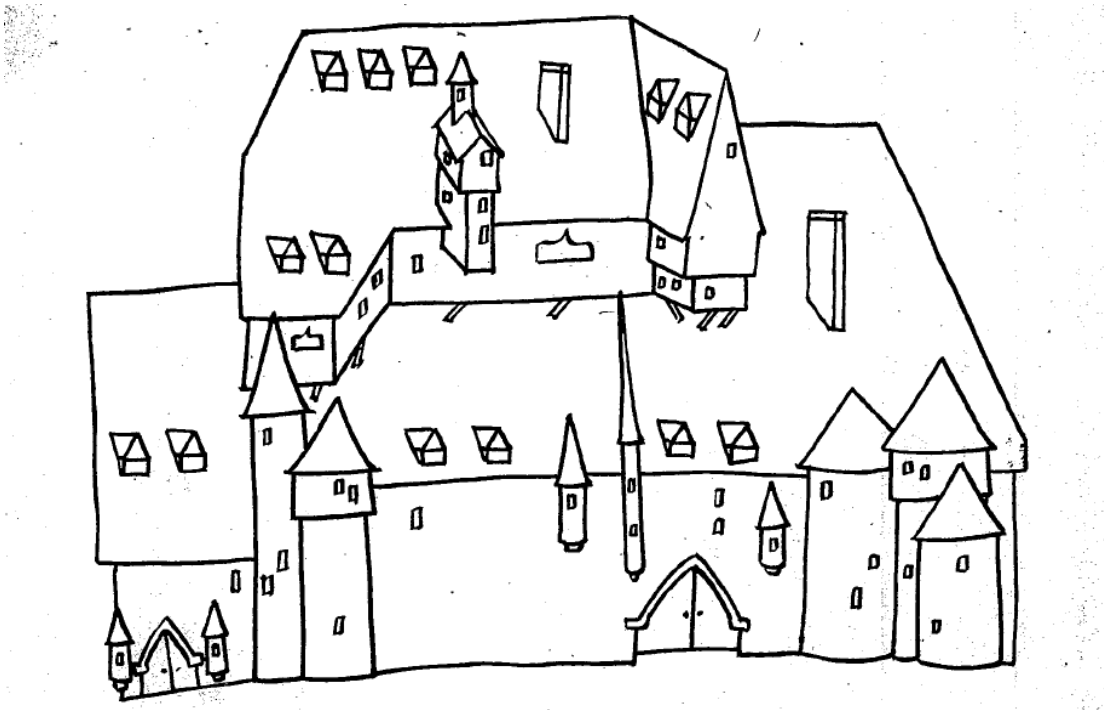
[78] qtd. in Gillmor, *Satie the Composer* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 142

[79] Cage, *Silence*, 81.

[80] Ibid.,1229.

[81] Cage's "Defense of Satie," qtd. in Nyman, "Cage and Satie," 1228.

spatial character of Satie's music and hoped to work with him: "A kind of telepathy inspired us simultaneously with a desire to collaborate."[82] In 1917, the new friends collaborated on the ballet *Parade*. Cocteau's pamphlet for the premiere, *Le Coq et l'arlequin*, presented scattered, juxtaposed aphorisms and bizarre one-liners about what makes good music alongside delightful line drawings by Picasso. The pamphlet reads like a manifesto for minimal music in the twentieth century. "Enough of clouds, waves, aquariums, water-sprites, and nocturnal scents," Cocteau writes, targeting Debussy's shimmering piano works. "What we need is a music of the earth, every-day music."[83] Cocteau admired Satie's refusal to manipulate through theatricality, sensuousness, decoration, or complexity. Satie offered an alternative, a new art that blended art and life and broke away from romantic pretensions.



[82] qtd. in Orledge, *Satie,* 152.

[83] Jean Cocteau, *Cock and Harlequin: Notes concerning Music*, trans. Rollo H. Myers (London: The Egoist Press, 1921), 21.

Illustration: Erik Satie, "Castles" drawing in blue ink, unsigned, 12.5 x 16.2 cm. Erik Satie Papers, 1866-1925. bMS Mus 193 (98), Houghton Library at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Le Coq et l'arlequin promotes simple, functional music: music like "bread," "a chair," or, most compellingly, "music I can live in, like a house."[84] Cocteau does not offer a specific image for this, although he adores the plainness of village folk tunes and singles out Satie's *Gymnopédies* as masterworks of clarity. For *Parade*, Cocteau had masterminded its signature fog horns, sirens, and other noise-making elements. Music in all of these cases expands the notion of musical space and sound and allows the listener to enter into it willingly and self-consciously — the guiding idea of furniture music. This is why even the simplest Debussy piano piece does not fit Cocteau's ideal: "One cannot get lost in a Debussy mist as one can in a Wagner fog, but it is not good for one."[85] Years later, Cocteau highlighted a moment in 1891 at the café Auberge du Clou for a short profile about Satie in a newspaper, describing a turn-of-the-century aesthetic model somewhat different from Cage and Shattuck's. Debussy was meeting with Satie to discuss composing a "Wagnérie" based on a text by Catulle Mendès. Satie, Cocteau writes, grimaced:

> 'Take my word for it,' he murmured, 'that's enough of Wagner. It's fine stuff, but it's not ours. What's needed ... is for the orchestra not to pull a face when an actor comes on stage. Think about it. Do the trees in the scenery pull faces? The thing is to make musical scenery, to create a musical climate in which characters move and talk. No couplets, no leitmotifs — *we should adopt a certain Puvis de Chavannes atmosphere.*'[86]

The muralist Puvis de Chavannes painted portraits and landscapes with symbolist and romantic elements, but the flat, pastel-colored characters populating his murals, as painted on the sides of buildings like the Paris City Hall, took on a decorative stasis. His frescoes did little more than color the

[84] Ibid., 22, 24, 21.

[85] Ibid., 36.

[86] qtd. in Orledge, *Satie*, 45-6. Debussy quoted this incident often, and it served as a guiding credo to his masterpiece *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

street.

Cocteau's emphasis on a "musical climate" stuck, but Shattuck highlighted a different visual analogy for Satie's music: the paintings of Piet Mondrian (1874 - 1944). Mondrian's bold grids and primary-color fields were static too but, in total abstraction, better realized the Banquet Years' ideals of self-reflexiveness, playfulness, and juxtaposition. Satie, like Mondrian, completely abandoned narrative and representation, bringing people "closer than ever before to the abruptness of the creative process." Shattuck describes how these artists left people self-aware while incorporating them into their work; he talks of a process in which work, artist, and spectator are involved and "*self-remembering*" — a "deliberate *cross* of art and life."[87] This approach was exemplified in Satie, especially his furniture music, which debuted in 1920 during the intermission of a play by Max Jacob. When actor Pierre Bertin introduced Satie's iconic *musique d'ameublement*, he defined it: "We urgently beg you not to attach any importance to it and to act during the intermission as if the music did not exist... [I]t hopes to contribute to life the way a casual conversation does, or a picture in a gallery, or a chair in which one is or is not seated."[88] Satie added: "We want to establish a music designed to satisfy 'useful' needs. Art has no part in such needs. Furniture music creates a vibration; it has no other goal; it fills the same role as light and heat." A band consisting of one piano, three clarinets, and a trombone scattered throughout the gallery room began to play short ditties in repeated patterns. Unfortunately, despite Satie's cries of "Keep on talking!" people sat and listened intently.[89]

Before Cage, hope came by way of film. Shattuck connects the passive listening modes

[87] Shattuck, *Banquet*, 332, 254.
[88] qtd. in Shattuck, *Banquet*, 168-69.
[89] qtd. in Shattuck, *Banquet*, 169.

required of furniture music to the natural listening experience of early movies. For René Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924), Satie solved the problem of synchronizing silent pictures to live music: "He broke up his score into a series of fragments, each of them cleverly proportioned to go with successive episodes in the film, and each of them capable of being repeated as many times as necessary; and they followed on from each other amazingly naturally and easily right up to the final frame."[90] Satie's minimal music, in non-development and fragmentation, took on renewed meaning with the collapsed narratives and quick cuts of movies. Moreover, in the virtual world of film, Satie's music reinforced "the effect of the visual image without ever demanding conscious attention."[91] Embedded in film — a medium that surged to abundance in 1960s America — music functioned so that listeners and viewers unknowingly opened their senses to the ambient: sounds, music, and visuals as a coherent whole. In a remarkable passage, Shattuck sees this union play out into the twentieth century:

> Since that day jukeboxes, radios, television, music while you work, canned music, audiotherapy — a whole race of creatures — have sprung into existence to fill the aural background of our lives the way interior decoration fills the visual background. … All music, of course, can be traced to forms of furniture music: rhythmic dance patterns, devotional and inspirational atmosphere for worship, background sounds for courtly gatherings ... Concert performance with lights lowered and admission by ticket brought about highly self-conscious habits of "listening" to music instead of just living with it.[92]

Ross's sense that technology returns music to its "natural evanescent state," takes shape here. All music, in the twentieth century, can be furniture music.

Shattuck also discovered an element of Satie that seemed to contradict his functional background music: *musique de placard*, or closet music. Toop, Prendergast, and many other

[90] Georges Auric, qtd. in Orledge, *Remembered*, 117.

[91] Shattuck, *Banquet*, 172.

[92] Ibid., 169-70.

contemporary sound historians have ignored this more hermetic side of Satie's music, but it is just as vital to understanding Cage and twentieth-century listening. Closet music is a unique, intimate music experienced when performers follow Satie's written scores. Satie's scores were incredibly illustrative, complex, or nonsensical — scattered with hilarious remarks[93] and drawings and very often structured without bar lines or signatures. Playing them, performers are brought closer to Satie's child-like, nonsensical imagination, and listening is heightened. For example, *Sports et divertissements* (1914), 21 short solo piano pieces patched alongside poems, stories, and drawings, invites an individual to follow written, visual, humorous, and musical parts at once. If furniture music is one side of Satie's multifarious music — the passive, ambient side — then closet music is a side requiring intense, solitary concentration. Shattuck is one of the few to pick up on the significance and inner experience of this double-edged style:

> [Closet music] comprises certain short compositions, as self-contained as droplets of mercury, in which the balance between elements is perfectly controlled. They require a new kind of listening, for they are too brief and tenuous for concert performance. One must play them oneself on the piano, murmuring the texts which punctuate the spaces in the staff, watching the visible notation, and listening to that same pattern of notation, and listening to that same pattern become melody. Among these aspects of the work, one cannot distinguish which is frame and which is framed.[94]

The process of deep listening as music unpredictably unfolds takes Satie's central aim (the cross of art and life) from the atmospheric, passive experience to a personal, hermetic one. Satie far preceded aleatory music, yet Satie's closet music, as felt by Shattuck, seemed to herald that movement's thinking;

[93] Volta compiles some of these notes and directions for performers: "dance inwardly," "detached but not dry," "light as an egg," "like a nightingale with a toothache," "as if you were congested," "with shy piety." A particularly baffling inscription on the sheet music of *Gnosiennes* directs the performer to play "from the tip of the thought." Another note simply says, "Wonder about yourself." Volta, Ornella. *Satie Seen through His Letters*. (London: M. Boyars, 1989), 46-9.

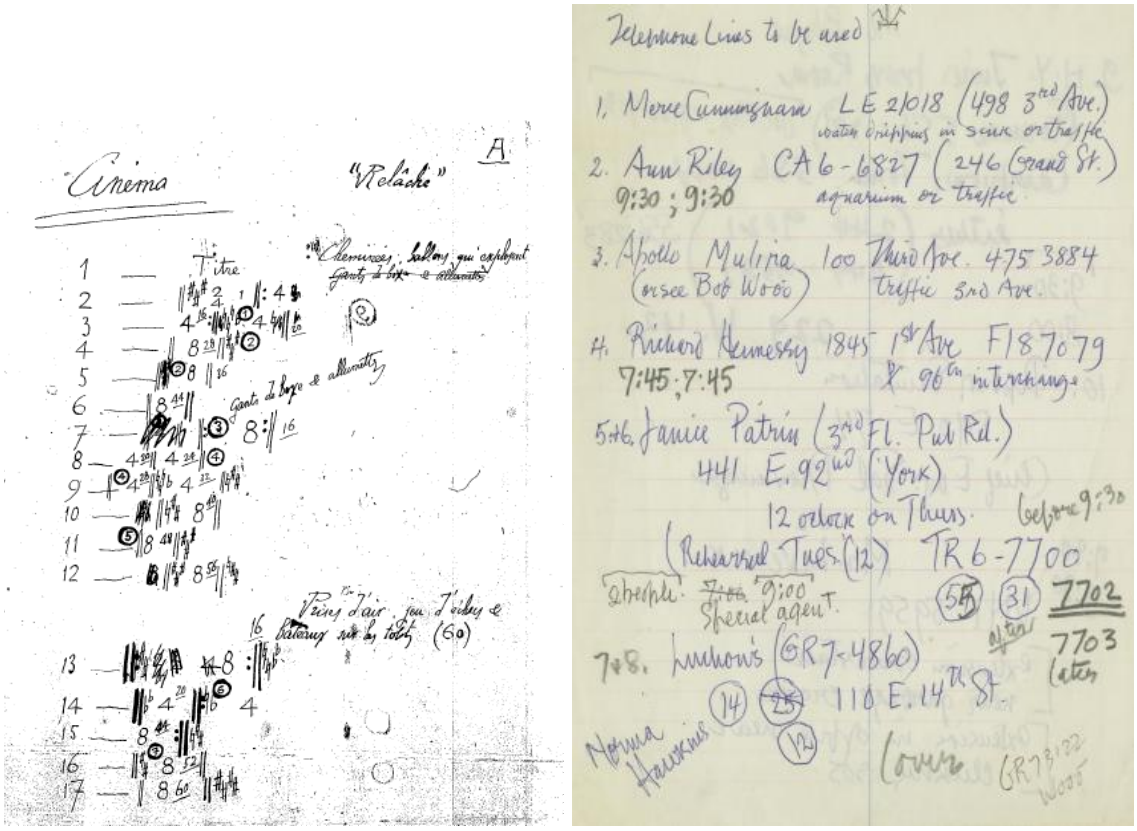
[94] Shattuck, *Banquet*, 176.

Cage connected the process of playing *Sports et divertissements* in particular directly "to the recent aleatory music where the performer is given a series of indications and diagrams without precise interpretation."[95] Shattuck, in another notable cross with Cage, described the Banquet Years' aesthetics of unpredictability and openness in terms of the composer's indispensable *I Ching*, an ancient Confucian text that, when read and interpreted according to randomly scattered yarrow sticks, "[Reveals] the essential state of the universe at any given moment."[96] In the order of disorder, truth is thrown back on the beholder. Art and life are blurred.

Vexations demonstrated elements of both closet and furniture music: performers in deep concentration trying to make sense of the work's notation and the tonal ambiguity, listeners treating it like background music. Both immersive styles reject romantic traditions and borders of art, but in opposite ways: outer and inner. In one final suggestive passage, Shattuck connects Satie's paradox to the technological climate of New York. He writes, "As technology has produced more and improved devices for sound reproduction, music has become increasingly divided between a public-passive activity and a personal-active one: floating in background sounds versus true listening. ... Such a double-edged aesthetic may be confusing but it remains profoundly symptomatic of the twentieth century.[97] Between the inner space of those performing *Vexations* and the wilder electronic expanse of *Variations VII*, Cage breathed new meaning and life into Shattuck's perceived "double-edged aesthetic." In 1963, Cage took Satie's non-development and repetition to an extreme, building stillness for people to enter, exit, meditate over, and do homework in — like a house. In 1966, Cage wholly

[95] qtd. in Michael Nyman, "Cage and Satie," *The Musical Times* 114 (1973), 1227.
[96] Shattuck, *Banquet,* 346.
[97] Shattuck, *Banquet,* 177.

abandoned repetition, collaborating on a noisier structure that in its own anarchic, technologically engineered way, collapsed time, space, and ambience into open form. The piece was also, arguably, the farthest Cage went to remove artist from art.



(Left: Erik Satie, "Relâche," score, unsigned, 1924. Erik Satie Papers, 1866-1925. bMS Mus 193 (77), Houghton Library at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Right: John Cage, Variations VII notes for phone lines, 1966. Courtesy of Julie Martin.)

IV. just facilitating reception
Variations VII

"Satie was discovering the possibility of telescoping time, of planting the whole world in an instant. These are the strivings of a new sensibility."[98] Who knew John Cage, using a diversity of communication technologies, would be able to bring this yearning to a concrete and spectacular reality? In October 1966, *Variations VII*, a collaborative work between Cage and a team of engineers from the telephone-company research subsidiary Bell Laboratories, employed radios, phone lines, city sounds, Geiger counters, brain waves, ambient noise, body sounds, and amplified appliances to condense the sound of New York and beyond into a singularity. "Motive: all sound sources in the world," summed up Herb Schneider, an engineer working on the experiment.[99] *Variations VII* funneled and reverberated sounds of the city and beyond throughout the grand 69th Regiment Armory; in doing so, Cage confronted audiences with 85 minutes of the world's technological and sonic overabundance and allowed listeners to enter into an immersive ambient space. Moreover, the performance foreshadowed musical life in the latter half of the twentieth century by classifying the artist forthright as a technician and collaborator.

Variations VII was one of Cage's final indeterminant works and perhaps his most extensive experiment with electronic media. *Variations VII* marked the end of a three-part series of works, including *Variations V* (1965) and *Variations VI* (1966), organized with the help of Billy Klüver, senior physicist and communications engineer at Bell Labs who used state-of-the-art electronics to advance Cage's experimental ambitions. *Variations V*, which premiered at New York's Philharmonic

[98] Ibid., 141-42.

[99] Herb Schneider's preparatory notes for equipment requirements, September 24, 1966, courtesy of Julie Martin.

Hall in July 1965, had engaged a handful of free-moving dancers to trigger radios and taped field recordings through ten capacitive antennae and specially designed photoelectric cells. As dancers broke a certain light beam, a radio turned on; if they neared one of ten antennae, the sound of, say, a kitchen drain loudened. *Variations VI* featured the same technology and chance operations, although Cage and Tudor (rather than dancers) triggered sounds by breaking light beams. *Variations VII*, the capstone of these technological projects, took dance out of the equation and expanded the number of electronics by an order of magnitude, with over 90 electronic inputs relaying through seventeen scattered loudspeakers in the immense hall. Over 30 photocells triggered noises as they did with the other *Variations*, while also projecting huge, ethereal shadows of Cage, Tudor, lead engineer Cecil Coker, a handful of other engineers, and the audience onto a white screen in back of two tables packed with electronics. The gorgeous light show reaffirmed the night's theme of amplification and assemblage, of sounds and of people.

Klüver helped organize *Variations VII* with artist Robert Rauschenberg as part of *9 evenings: art, theatre, and engineering*, a festival featuring ten intermedia experiments in New York's 69th Regiment Armory. Funded by what would become Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) and the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts (which had funded *Vexations* three years before), *9 evenings* showcased a variety of intermedia arts, from Rauschenberg's performance *Open Score*, the wiring of which inflated sounds of a mock tennis game into an exchange of reverberating booms, to Tudor's *Bandoneon! (a combine)*, a musical performance in which a solo performer's accordion triggered lights and sounds around the Armory drill hall, a 34,000 square-foot space built in 1906 with 130-foot-high ceilings. The visionary event drew 1,400 visitors each night, including the upper echelons

of the New York art scene ("Had the roof fallen, there would be no more American art."[100]) but ultimately received confused reviews: "Such an event would raise the scale, public access, and technological sophistication of avant-garde art to the level of public spectacle. ... The scope of *9 evenings* as much as its conception was regarded as bold and innovative when the event came to pass. An early model of corporate-industrial sponsorship for art projects (although privately funded, ultimately), it was perceived as a critical success by some, a selling out of the avant-garde by many, and a box office flop by most."[101]

Klüver had moved to the United States in 1954 and at Bell Laboratories helped pioneer infrared lasers and high-speed telephony. Fascinated and driven by the infinite possibilities of art and technology, he eventually ingratiated himself in the New York avant-garde and helped his artist friend Jean Tinguely engineer *Homage to New York* (1960), a kinetic contraption of found junk and electric motors programmed to move around a room in the Museum of Modern Art and spectacularly self-destruct. Klüver also helped design the photocell sensor, along with Coker and Fred Waldhauer. Waldhauer was a crucial character in the world of audio technology. Not only did he help lead *9 evenings* as an engineer at Bell Labs; years earlier he had innovated a seminal portable music device: the transistor radio. (One of which found its way into the sonic soup of *Variations VII*.) When Klüver reached out to Cage to see if he'd be interested in composing a piece for a festival that would draw together years of intermingling between artists and corporate engineers, Cage lent a delighted and rather utopian statement in response:

> Art and science are inextricably connected. Changing views of the manner in which

[100] Brian O'Doherty, "new york: 9 armored nights" in *9 evenings reconsidered: art, theatre, and engineering, 1966*, exhibition catalogue (Cambridge: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 2006), 74-5.
[101] Deborah Garwood, "The Future of an Idea: *9 evenings*—Forty Years Later," *A Journal of Performance and Art* 85 (2007), 37.

> nature operates bring about corresponding changes in art. And changes in technology make other things possible to do than were done before. … If I imagine myself then as a composer in a situation where anything can be done, I imagine making a music little different from the concerts of ambient sounds we nowadays hear wherever we are when we listen. I imagine this music as technically like my daily experience: wireless. I imagine all distinctions between art and life removed. Art would then have to do with the opening of ourselves to the world in which we live.[102]

Cage set to work sketching ideas on how to evoke an experience in which modern life, its "wireless" nature, would concentrate itself in the armory's atmosphere.

The project did not have a score, but Cage lined up "12 remarks" for the event, which take note of performance space, transience of sound, and a diminished role of the composer:

> Seated or unseated (space for
> audience movement in
> loud-speaker surrounded area),
> indicating this freedom by
> non-verbal means.
>
> no playbacks used,
> tape machines
> i.e. no previously
> prepared sounds
>
> catching sounds from air as
> though with nets, not
> throwing out however the
> unlistenable ones.

Cage emphasizes that "no special theatrical or visual activities" ought to take place during the performance, and he prescribes performers as:

> making audible what is
> otherwise silent therefore no
> interposition of intention.
> just facilitating
> reception. …

[102] John Cage to Billy Klüver, typed letter June 31, 1965, courtesy of Julie Martin.

> Collaboration with engineers
> composition socialized.[103]

Cage describes several of his aesthetic interests at once, which again find roots in Satie: music as a transient experience in structured space, process as determined by chance (the random position of people around the piece's central platform), the acceptance of sounds-in-themselves, and the tempering of self-expression — here by way of democratizing composition. This last piece is crucial, for it both heightens ideals of indeterminacy which had been building for years up to this point and foreshadows Cage's move into an explicitly politically motivated work. "*Variations VII* ... must have been the furthest out [Cage] went in terms of giving up control, because there was really no specification of what should happen as time passed," engineer David Behrman commented.[104] For much of the rest of his career, Cage would align himself closely with the architect and theorist Buckminster Fuller, whose geodesic domes did infinitely "more with less" and were infused with utopian dreams of engineering away the ills of capitalism and the ego.

Most importantly, Cage's notes refer to composers as "facilitating reception" — fishing out and amplifying wireless sounds already present around the city and the armory. Cage and the engineers acted no more than as mediators. "The interesting thing about [*Variations VII*] is that it didn't use any magnetic tape. … no recorded sounds were part of it," Cage said. "All the sounds were, so to speak, in the air … at the instant of them being heard."[105] To the pleasure of Cage, sounds extricated from New York were as unique to the performers as they were to the audience. Their tools and sound sources

[103] John Cage, "Variations VII: 12 remarks re musical performance," notes transcribed by Julie Martin, 1966.

[104] David Behrman, interview in *Variations VII by John Cage*, DVD, produced by Billy Klüver and Julie Martin. (Artpix and Microcinema International; 2008), DVD.

[105] John Cage, interview in *Variations VII by John Cage*, DVD, produced by Billy Klüver and Julie Martin. (Artpix and Microcinema International; 2008), DVD.

included: 20 radio receivers in communication bands, 10 simultaneous telephone lines (including lines connected to a popular restaurant Luchow's, the New York Times press room, Merce Cunningham's studio, the Central Park Zoo Aviary, the Con Edison electric power generating system, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' lost dog holding room, the New York Sanitation Department depot on the East River, and minimalist composer Terry Riley's turtle tank at home), four body sounds (heart, lungs, stomach, and — replicating Alvin Lucier's experimental brainwave music — the mind), sounds of clothes, six intimate contact mics on the floor and on the platform, including one on a soda bottle, 12 amplified machinery sounds (including a juicer, blender, washing machine), two Geiger counters, and 10 generators producing electronic sounds (sine, square, triangular, and pulse sounds).[106] Tudor, Cage, Behrman, Anthony Gnazzo, Lowell Cross, and other performers and engineers wandered around two platforms in the middle of the armory hall, twiddling knobs and gadgets for no preset amount of time. As they crossed beams lighting up bodies and faces from below the arrangement, different machines turned on and off, creating "a solid continuum of noise which appeared chaotic until *instinctively* one began to separate out different streams, repetitions, identifications — all forcing multiple experiences with the real-life fright removed."[107]

Cage and his crew performed *Variations VII* on October 15 and 16, and the latter was filmed in a documentary directed by Rauschenberg. The film gives a glimpse of the immense space and sound; blooming outward from the repeated *woop* of generators through a horn amplifier (which Cage had singled out: "Marvelous! It sounds like war. Let's open with that tonight!"[108]), the electronic sounds of

[106] Schneider, notes.

[107] O'Doherty, "9 armored nights," 76.

[108] Lowell Cross, interview in *Variations VII by John Cage*, DVD, produced by Billy Klüver and Julie Martin. (Artpix and Microcinema International; 2008), DVD.

the first performance merged quickly into a wall of static. After about five minutes, white noise gave way to an expansive *ohm* of fans and oscillators — a noise floor on top of which indistinguishable electronic and industrial squeals, grinds, and hisses got louder and softer, intermingled, and subsumed one another. Each noise filled the space with an immense echo, turning the armory into an incredibly soundful and immersive environment; Klüver had measured the natural reverb of the hall as precisely six seconds, which, as engineer Lowell Cross remarked, gave every sound, however minute, a titanic size. The first performance lasted about 85 minutes.

In that first performance, a handful of audience members allegedly left their seats, fanned in a flat arrangement around the performers' tables, to stand and move closer to the music. "Their bodies," Michelle Kuo writes, "entered a field of viscerally shifting sound routes and bandwidths, privy to the strength of telecommunications signals as well as the acoustics of the Armory's cavernous shell."[109] Video artist Nam June Paik was present in the audience and recounted the natural but remarkable audience reaction to *Variations VII*, a piece he called "maybe the best performance of electronic music." He explained: "Fantastic sounds [were] coming from nowhere, but everywhere. So we were just walking around. … Nobody asked them to take a walk, but naturally people stood up and they start wandering around."[110] Cage, enjoying a setup in which audiences would be physically incorporated, encouraged patrons onto the floor during the second performance. Some sat but scores more walked directly up to the table; as documented in Rauschenberg's film, patrons — mostly white and formally dressed, shuffling around in suits and cat-eye glasses — peered around with binoculars,

[109] Michelle Kuo, "9 Evenings in reverse" in *9 evenings reconsidered: art, theatre, and engineering, 1966*, exhibition catalogue (Cambridge: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 2006), 31-2.

[110] Nam June Paik, interview in *Variations VII by John Cage*, DVD, produced by Billy Klüver and Julie Martin. (Artpix and Microcinema International; 2008), DVD.

smoked, wandered, laid on the floor, stared at lights, shouted across the room to one another. Two women seemed to deeply meditate, perhaps attempting to pick out bits of the electronic sound mix or letting the sounds of their city just wash over them.

The event embodied ambient listening. People basked in a wall of noise that turned the old vaulted space itself into music; sound immersed listeners from "above, from below and from all directions," a feeling echoed by Paik.[111] *Vexations* and *Variations VII* may have been opposite in form (the precisely-timed, hermetic recapitulation of a theme versus the disarranged, outward amplification of many transient themes at once) yet each generated a wash of sound in which listeners' attentions geared toward the ambient. With *Variations VII*, Cage and his collaborators applied new technologies to this effect; in doing so, the piece reveals how the sheer amount of modern sound "in the air" — a city's industrial, electronic, and natural sonic spheres together — underlied new ambient sensibilities.[112] Confronted with the meaningless and fleeting result, Rauschenberg's smiling audiences didn't search for satisfaction — they just listened. And Cage joined them, wandering alongside through an open and radical sound structure that grew and changed in sync with the whole ensemble's variable motion.

Cage, in his "Lecture on Nothing," had talked of using quiet sounds and silence as a reaction against the bombast of sound and commercial music in post-war America. *Variations VII* exemplified Cage's other embrace of noise, a nose-dive into all sound. Kahn embeds Cage's motives here in the climate of post-war communications technologies:

> As the mass media introduced more and more sounds, individuals became generationally capable of apprehending sounds in their social complexity and at an accelerated pace. … It was no coincidence that Cage's progressive expansion into *all*

[111] Stockhausen, "Two Lectures," 69.
[112] John Cage, artist statement, *9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering*, designed and edited by Pontus Hultén and Frank Königsburg (New York: E.A.T., 1966).

> *sound* and *always sound* occurred at the same time, that his emblematic silence was founded on a silencing of communications technologies … or that a shift toward listening occurred as listening became more of a consumerist imperative.[113]

As noises surged throughout the city at an incomprehensible pace, *Variations VII* threw the chaotic reality of modern sound directly at listeners. The conglomeration and amplification of electronic sound in the armory bypassed listeners' ability to selectively listen and discern musical meaning — creating, instead, a static and immersive noise-music experience. Toop reverberated Kahn's idea when he spoke of "an ethereal culture" emerging "in response to the intangibility of twentieth century communications."[114]

The year of *Variations VII*, Cage and his composer friend Morton Feldman broadcast a casual conversation together as a "Radio Happening" for the New York radio station WBAI.[115] Between laughter and long pauses, the two friends reflected on the surrounded world, the state of the artist, and the future. Feldman lamented a world so noisy that even outside on the beach people have been intruded by transistor radios blaring rock and roll. "You know how I reacted to ... radio in the environment?" Cage responded to Feldman's perceived "intrusion." "Very much as the primitive people adjusted to the animals which frightened them. I drew pictures of them." *Variations VII*, for one, used a transistor radio as a musical instrument. Cage declared that now he heard art in all noise only by adjusting his state of mind. Invoking the wisdom of Satie, whose approach synthesized noise and music of the world, he urged a universal opening of ears to that end: "This is a coin, which has two sides. Say you think of your thoughts as the reality or your conversation … and the environment as an intrusion.

[113] Kahn, *Noise*, 199.

[114] Toop, *Ocean*, i.

[115] "Radio Happenings I - V," John Cage and Morton Feldman. *WBAI*, 1966-67. http://archive.org/details/CageFeldman3

[Satie] takes that coin and turns it over. … The environment is a reality, what you want to do is an intrusion. … Is [the work of an artist] not an incisive intrusion?"

A year later after *Variations VII*, Cage and Feldman returned for their final "Radio Happening" in which Cage talked of diminishing personal thoughts and goals on a global level. They discussed a broad paradigm shift in art and design, in which the value of objects had become nil outside of the subjective and fluid value people place on them. Structure remains vital but ideas and objects will continue to be transient, Cage remarked, rallying again Satie, the utopian ideals of Fuller, and now-famous media theorist Marshall McLuhan's notion of a global village. "The whole world," he declared, "must shift from its present preoccupation with competition to a world of cooperation." *Variations VII*, although in a bohemian bubble, envisaged such a community of people working together and channeling a city's vast soundscape, a soundscape in which listening could only be ambient. In that more selfless world, reflected in minimal music, Cage rejected journeys of personal fulfillment. "Spending your whole life to gain something is a very recent, modern way of life," Cage surmised. "Hmmm?"[116]

[116] Ibid.











(*Top-right: John Cage tests phones during a rehearsal of the performance of* Variations VII, *"Checking each thing used to make sure it works."*[117] *Other various photos of the performance, listening, and the 69th Regiment Armory courtesy of Julie Martin.*)

[117] Cage, "12 remarks," 2.

V. Conclusion
"Everything is Middle"

Harvard Bridge in Cambridge offers one of the more majestic views of the Boston skyline at night. I remember, one particularly warm spring evening last year, approaching that stretch of road on my bike when a song popped up on my iPod, "Sometimes," by the rock band My Bloody Valentine, which captivated me ever since its appearance in Sofia Coppola's 2003 film, *Lost in Translation*. Albeit on mediocre headphones, hearing the song's mix of rumbling electric guitars and soft vocals on the half-mile expanse across the Charles River, in concert with the traffic noise and the glowing blur of trains and taxicabs, the rush of wind and the unimaginable darkness of water below, the glimmering ensemble of red aircraft warning lights and the faraway grid of fluorescent office spaces, I was at once reminded of a great movie and completely in the moment. The flood of light and sound and the thrill of riding too fast — no doubt, a perilous combination — gave way to calm and wonder. Instead of disorientation, I felt repletion.

In the stampede of urban noise that has in part defined the last hundred-or-so years, new ways of perceiving sound and finding meaning in music have necessarily emerged. Erik Satie and John Cage, by lending a unique mindfulness to the environment in their music, opened ears and calmed spirits in a dizzyingly rapid sonic world. That world continues to speed up and overwhelm in the age of the internet, each sleek new term — the global village, the information superhighway, big data, overabundance — describing aspects of the same thing: a wider and wider river of knowledge, with greater and greater sensory stimulus, in an ever-more technologically mediated space. In order for individuals to navigate the flow, listening itself must change. When, as is so often the case these days, we cannot flee the clamor of the city to a quiet symphony hall, a haven in the woods, or a silent piano room, we are tasked to

float and not dwell on the aural environment's many inner tensions: acoustic and electronic, natural and amplified, transient and structural, real and virtual, live and recorded, noisy and harmonic. In an auditory fog, listeners work harder and harder to discern desired sound or strive to be mindful of it all — tune to the air in which all sounds compete. In a word, individuals can listen ambiently. Malcolm McCullough describes this as "when you perceive the whole environment more and its individual signals less, when at least some of the information overabundance assumes embodied, inhabitable form, when your attention isn't being stolen, when you feel renewed sensibility to your surroundings."[118] McCullough, an architect, aligns this ambient sensibility with a revived philosophical preoccupation in the twentieth century with elements "in the air," a phrase central to Cage's written statements about *Variations VII.*[119]

The value of music today, then, often comes from its nuanced engagement with space and location, whether an immense armory or a cityscape. Satie was the first to compose music with explicit new dimensions of space in mind: the outward space, with his functional music contributing to the atmosphere of a room, and the inward space, in which sketched pieces, words, and illustrations together demanded a hermetic, individual attentiveness. There's the sound of the music itself, the miniscule piano pieces, the half-finished ideas, the folk tunes, the noise-filled operas, each refusing to develop an idea or emotion. Satie, instead, brought stillness and spaciousness to Paris as it charged into the new century. A state-of-the art Eiffel Tower shimmered, new department stores filled, and Satie, who in the years of his greatest artistic output insisted on walking everywhere in the bustling artistic milieu of Montmartre, found solace in the café, where he formulated a new music fit to the unfamiliar urban tempo.

[118] Malcolm McCullough, *Ambient Commons* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 2.
[119] Ibid., 167.

That is not to say his *Gymnopédies* simply offered an oasis from the industrial din. Rather, Satie's sound, from the simplest piano ditty to the most turbulent play, threw an unrelenting industrial environment back on itself — the storming cogs of the factory, the jagged cuts of films, the hum of the street. "Without causal progression, everything is middle," Shattuck said. In Satie's musical universe, "Unity becomes not progression but intensification by standing still, a continuous present in which everything is taken together and always."[120] This is the central tenet of minimal music, the best of which breathes meaning into modern life's electronic drones and patterns, its fragmented yet continual bombardment of signals and frequencies.

Audio and communication technologies have changed less than one might think over the last century, and many of the electronic instruments around us are, arguably, iterations of early designs: the radio, the telephone, the phonograph. Perhaps with the exception of the invention of television, what changes most in the time between Satie and Cage is the ubiquity, speed, and power of media in the city. This is no small event. The sheer abundance and overlap of mass-produced recordings and moving images in the 1960s demanded entire new ways of thinking about them. Juxtaposition, one of Shattuck's central themes for the early twentieth century arts, lands at the core of McLuhan's take on the onslaught of communication technologies:

> Television, radio and the newspaper ... deal in auditory space, by which I mean that sphere of simultaneous relations created by the act of hearing. We hear from all directions at once; this creates a unique, unvisualizable space. The all-at-once-ness of auditory space is the exact opposite of lineality, of taking one thing at a time. ... Any pattern in which the components co-exist without direct, lineal hook-up or connection, creating a field of simultaneous relations, is auditory ... They have no interconnection of logic or statement. Yet they form a mosaic of corporate image whose parts are interpenetrating. Such is also the kind of order that tends to exist in a city or a culture. It

[120] Shattuck, *Banquet*, 347.

is a kind of orchestral, resonating unity, not the unity of logical discourse.[121]

In 1967, Cage described how this fluid, all-encompassing auditory sphere played into New York music: "We are now, McLuhan tells us, no longer separate from the environment. New art and music do not communicate an individual's conceptions in ordered structures, but they implement processes which are, as our daily lives are, opportunities for perception."[122] The esteemed pianist Glenn Gould offered a similar point of view when he surmised that listeners in the twentieth century, as active consumers in a record industry, did more than passively analyze: "At the center of the technological debate ... is a new kind of listener — a listener more participant in the musical experience."[123] With these thoughts in mind, Cage greeted the century's racket with open arms. Morton Feldman heard incessant intrusions, but Cage heard opportunities for new modes of listening; in the 1960s, as Pritchett pinpoints, Cage "saw himself as the creator of musical experiences that would allow people to adjust to the new electronic media environment."[124]

Both Cage and Satie were informed by artistic disinterestedness and an ambient sensibility but Cage, as mass media flourished, eventually questioned the fundamental notion of composition. This is where Satie and Cage most differ. Cage's works after 1960, serve as open and transient *processes*, not objects, mirroring America's unprecedented abundance of sound. During this time, Cage begins to write of "a preference for quantity over quality," a stance exemplified in the armory show and the performance at The Pocket.[125] Broader social and political upheavals of New York in the 1960s are at play too; as an artist, Cage finds a renewed passion for sweeping, ambitious ideas, much in the vein of

[121] Marshall McLuhan, "The Agenbite of Outwit," *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1963), 43.
[122] qtd. in James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 151.
[123] Glenn Gould, "Prospects of Recording," *The Glenn Gould Reader* ed. Tim Page (New York: Knopf, 1990), 345.
[124] Pritchett, 152.
[125] Ibid., 157.

Fuller. Technology lay at the heart of Cage's new trajectory: "Cage saw music as more than just making pieces by ordering sounds in some fashion ... Music, he felt, had a larger goal, a greater scope: it included action and new technologies, and could serve to change not his own mind, not just other musicians' minds, but the 'global mind' of society at large."[126] Looking to the future, Cage imparted a music tuned to urban technological life in its true form: non-linear, fluid, ambient. No neat beginnings or ends. All middle.

[126] Ibid., 146

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